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ABSTRACT

The retention of African-American students on college campuses is examined in this study conducted at Oberlin College, Ohio, a school which has been fairly successful in retaining African-American students over the past 20 years. The study addressed the needs of African-American students by looking at the college's institutional symbols. In particular, the study looked at Oberlin's Black Studies Department, its Afrikan Heritage House (an African-American dormitory), and the African-American student association. The study used and analyzed data collected from interviews conducted on Oberlin's campus; the interviews were designed to determine what it is that these institutions offer that makes African-American students at Oberlin comfortable. The study examined four key areas: support, cultural enrichment, status, and political advantage, that the three institutions being studied seem to possess that contribute in providing an environment conducive to African-American student retention. Contains 16 references. (GLR)

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THE RETENTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS:
THE EFFECTS OF INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Presented at the
Annual Convention of
The American Educational Research Association
Boston, Massachusetts

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Much has been written regarding the fact that large numbers of African-American students are uncomfortable on predominantly white campuses. These students feel lonely in classes where they are often the only African-American; they feel that the largely white male faculty members and administrators are inhospitable and insensitive; and they feel that, in general, the campus reflects insensitivity to their unique cultural experience.

To be sure, this uncomfortableness that African-American students feel on these campuses contributes to the relatively low retention which African-American students experience in higher education. For African-Americans entering undergraduate school between the years 1972 and 1982, the combined retention and graduation rate after four years ranged from 41 percent for the class entering in 1972 down to 15 percent for the class entering in 1982 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988).

In an effort to address the low retention of African-American students, I explore in this paper the qualities that are characteristic of institutions at which African-American students are comfortable. Put another way, if effectiveness is measured in terms of the comfort level of African-American students, what characteristics do effective higher education institutions have?

Some institutions have been more successful than others in making African-American students feel at home. One such institution is Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. As a result, Oberlin has a relatively high retention rate for African-American students. Because campus culture is so important in terms of how students feel about a particular school, I will look at selected aspects of the culture of Oberlin College.

Culture

More and more, researchers are linking the study of organizations with the study of the concept of culture (Smircich, 1983; Richards and Shujaa, in press). But what is culture? Culture is a dynamic expression of a collective view of the world (Goodenough, 1971). It is a shared way of thinking, based on agreed upon norms, values and beliefs (Slehl and Martin, 1981). Culture influences how new members are socialized into an organization. This occurs through the development of cultural artifacts such as a historical image, organizational climate, sacred norms and institutions. The focus of this paper is on the impact of one set of cultural artifacts--institutions.

Institutions are symbols of an organization's culture; they are generally organized and institutionalized symbols or structures that serve as living and lasting representations of the culture. Such symbols are a powerful means to communicate an organization's culture (Martin and Powers, 1983).

Oberlin College

Oberlin College is located in Oberlin, Ohio (population 8,600), 35 miles southwest of Cleveland. The College was founded in 1833. It is comprised of the College of Arts and Sciences--with about 2,250 students--and the Music Conservatory--with about 500 students (Oberlin College, 1987).

Oberlin's history is unique. In 1835, the Oberlin Board of Trustees stated "the education of the people of color is a matter of great interest and should be encouraged and sustained in this institution." By 1900, one out of every two African-Americans who had graduated from a predominantly white institution had earned their degree from Oberlin College (Oberlin College, 1987).

Oberlin College has been relatively successful--particularly in the past twenty years--in retaining African-American students. The combined retention and graduation rate after six years for African-Americans who enrolled at Oberlin in 1977 was 77 percent. For the students who enrolled at Oberlin

between 1968 and 1977, as of December 1983, the overall combined retention and graduation rate was 70 percent. As of 1986, the combined retention and graduation for more recent classes at Oberlin were as follows:

Class	Retention Rate
1978	53 (after eight years)
1979	74 (after seven years)
1980	51 (after six years)
1981	47 (after five years)

In an earlier paper addressing the culture of Oberlin College (Lomotey, 1990), I argued that Oberlin's culture is symbolized through the school's historical image, climate, sacred norms and institutions. Moreover, I stressed that a key sacred norm at Oberlin was an emphasis on tolerance of African-American students and a conviction that these students had a right to organizational and institutional expression. In this paper, I focus on the institutional symbols of Oberlin's culture as they relate to this sacred norm--tolerance of African-American students. Specifically, I will look at Oberlin's Black Studies Department, its Afrikan Heritage House--a dormitory for African-American students and Oberlin's African-American student association--the ABUSUA.

The focus on the institutional manifestations of Oberlin's culture is instructive for at least two reasons. First, if there is hope for replicating any aspect of what is working at Oberlin, one can begin with the institutional arrangements that are there. Second, if we can determine what it is that these institutions provide for African-American students, it is possible that other institutional arrangements may provide those things on other campuses.

My intent in this paper is to look at the institutions that have developed

at Oberlin to address the needs of African-American students. More particularly, I seek to determine, through content analysis of data from interviews conducted on Oberlin's campus, what it is that these institutions offer that makes African-American students at Oberlin comfortable.

STUDY METHODS

Sample

The sample was composed of eight students, 11 faculty, six staff and six administrators. Along with a research associate, I interviewed a total of six staff people from Student Support Services, Afrikan Heritage House, and Admissions. Eight African-American students were interviewed--two randomly selected from each class (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior and senior). We also randomly selected and interviewed five faculty members.

At the time of this study, there were six faculty in Oberlin's Black Studies Department--including a part-time person in drama. We interviewed five of the six faculty members. (The sixth member of the Black Studies faculty was not on campus while we were conducting the interviews). In seeking to interview all of the African-American faculty, we found one additional professor and conducted an interview with him also. Finally, we interviewed six administrators in financial aid, student services, and enrollment planning. In total, we interviewed 31 persons. (See Table I).

PLACE TABLE I ABOUT HERE

Instrumentation

I developed separate interview instruments for students, staff, faculty and administrators. Generally, the questions fit into seven categories: campus climate, Black Studies, support services, admissions, retention, financial aid and the larger community. This paper focuses on the questions and responses that were specifically related to the Black Studies Department, The Afrikan

Heritage House and The ABUSUA. Each category of respondents was asked to respond to a different, though similar, set of questions. The total number of questions varied somewhat, as shown below:

- o students - 46
- o staff - 78
- o faculty - 46
- o administrators - 78

The instruments were piloted with students, staff, faculty and administrators at a university in western New York and appropriate changes were made prior to our conducting the actual study.

Coding

In coding the responses, I focused on the responses related to three specific institutions at Oberlin--Afrikan Heritage House, The Black Studies Department and the ABUSUA. Each instance in which respondents spoke of their perceptions of what any of these institutions provided for African-American students was coded. After compiling lists of perceptions for each of the three institutions, I then grouped them into four categories according to the advantages that the respondents indicated these institutions afforded African-American students. These categories were support, cultural enrichment, status and political advantage. Definitions of each of these categories follow.

Support is generally defined as helping African-American students to get through Oberlin on an emotional, social or spiritual level. It includes things like offering a sense of community/family, offering a sanctuary and being a resource.

Cultural enrichment is guidance in learning more about one's people and oneself with the goal of increased self pride, self confidence and the ultimate enhancement of one's college experience. Such enrichment at Oberlin includes

the Friday Night Lecture Series and the fostering of discussions by the ABUSUA.

Status, in this instance, refers only to Oberlin's Black Studies Department and entails the prestige that African-American students feel as a result of being associated with such a reputable department. Indications of this status include the Department's national reputation and its strong faculty.

Political advantage is the final category and speaks to offering African-American students a vehicle to be heard and to protect their rights as citizens of the campus. Political advantage is provided through such things as offering a political voice and being vigilant.

FINDINGS

Afrikan Heritage House

Through Afrikan Heritage House, according to our respondents, African-American students are provided with support and cultural enrichment. Most important in the provision of support is offering students a sense of community/family. A white staff person described the need for a sense of community/family in this way: "It's a place where they can be away from the majority culture for a while if they want to have that family atmosphere." A white faculty member agreed: "I think the Afrikan Heritage House is particularly important on campus. I think that really gives [African-American students] a sense of community." A student described the support in this way:

Not many of us today have reached that level of self confidence and level of self assuredness about themselves and so I feel as young Black Americans growing here in this country, places like Afrikan Heritage House and the family are necessary. If not for political, at least for the family. I think Afrikan Heritage House appeals to Black students for different reasons. I think most often the reasons would be I feel very comfortable there. I don't need to put on any airs. I want to be myself.

Another student said of the support provided by the House:

I don't particularly hang out there. I have friends who are there but I enjoy knowing that it is there if I want to go get away from the white people in this school. Sometimes you just can't deal with everyone. In

that case I think it is very good.

When discussing how the House provides students with cultural enrichment, people that we spoke with most often referred to the Friday Night Lecture Series as indicative of this enrichment. A student said: "...as time has gone on I enjoy the Lecture Series." Another student added: "It [Afrikan Heritage House] is some place where you can live with people of your same background, you can talk about things, and they have different speakers coming and... you can be proud of your Blackness." (See Table II).

Abusua

The African-American student organization at Oberlin--The ABUSUA--is important to these students, according to our respondents, for three reasons. Like the Afrikan Heritage House, it provides African-American students with support and cultural enrichment. However, the people we spoke with also referred to indications of political advantage which ABUSUA offers to African-American students.

The ABUSUA provides support in a number of ways including offering a sense of community/family. An African-American administrator saw it in the following way:

What ABUSUA does is helps all of those different experiences [that African-American students bring to Oberlin] be synthesized in one place and it is shared and then it is divided and then it is shared again with the rest of the campus community. It gives them a sense of belonging.

A student agreed and said: "...I think the ABUSUA is very important to certain students, myself included, because it does give us a connection and we just be together and be free in ourselves."

The ABUSUA offers cultural enrichment in several ways including helping students maintain their identity. This point was made by a white staff person who said: "[ABUSUA] is a very important arena for students to develop leadership skills, for students to develop their own maturity, their own identity, their

own cultural identity."

Finally, the ABUSUA provides a political advantage for African-American students, in part, by amplifying their political voice. A student talked about this advantage: "In terms of the usefulness of ABUSUA, people will recognize the usefulness in terms of cultural activities and in terms of the political voice [it provides] for Black students." (See Table III).

Black Studies Department

Oberlin's Black Studies Department is also important to African-American students. The Department offers African-American students status, support, cultural enrichment and political advantage. Status accrues, in part, from the fact that Oberlin's Black Studies Department has a national reputation. One African-American faculty member admonished the Department for not acknowledging its national stature: I think that Black Studies at Oberlin ought to begin to see itself in relation to some of the most respected Black studies departments in the country." Another African-American faculty member said: "...the [Black Studies] Department at Oberlin is considered a [to be] a model for Black studies departments around the country. Academically and intellectually I feel that we have some of the best faculty in the country."

Oberlin's Black Studies Department also serves as a good resource for students. An African-American staff person said: "...[The Black Studies Department] is one of the supporters of their program house, Afrikan Heritage House, and I think that serves as a good resource for the students."

The Department provides cultural enrichment through its curricular focus on African-American people. This point was made by an African-American faculty person who told us:

In the Black Studies Department you do get a focus on things Black and that presents a richer challenge to both Black students and to white students in trying to integrate a focus on Black people in this world.

At another point he added:

I don't think again that outside of Black Studies there is a special emphasis or recognition or tendency to include things that would relate necessarily to Blacks anymore than professors would integrate things from all cultures.

Finally, the Department provides a political advantage because it offers a political base for African-American students. (See Table IV).

CONCLUSIONS

Oberlin's Afrikan Heritage House, its African-American student organization--the ABUSUA--and its Black Studies Department are all important cultural artifacts. They each play a role in the retention of African-American students. Their contributions can be categorized in four areas: support, cultural enrichment, status and political advantage. Each of these is important. However, the perceived support that is provided in all three of these institutions was most often referred to by the people to whom we spoke. This support seems to be the most important characteristic of these institutions for African-American students.

The second most important thing that these institutions offer to African-American students appears to be cultural enrichment. Here again, this quality is offered by all three institutions. Third in importance appears to be the status afforded to African-American students through Oberlin's Black Studies Department. Finally African-American students benefit at Oberlin from the provision of a political advantage which they receive through the ABUSUA and the Black Studies Department.

Support, cultural enrichment, status and political advantage, then, seem to be the four primary advantages offered to African-American students through Oberlin's institutions that appear to contribute to their relatively high retention rate.

Implications

On a practical level, the importance of these three institutions at Oberlin suggests the need for other campuses to create similar institutions where such institutions do not exist. In instances where similar institutions already exist, efforts should be made to enhance these institutions with an increased campus commitment in the form of additional material and human resources. Second, those who are working in other colleges and universities may want to consider other kinds of institutional arrangements that can facilitate the provision of these four advantages for African-American students. It is possible, for example, that a student affairs office with adequate material and human resources could offer cultural enrichment and support for African-American students.

It is important, however, to understand the significance of the self-initiation and self-determination implicit in Oberlin's institutions. It is most critical, then, that individuals within these institutions support efforts of students, staff and faculty who are working to build support structures to help facilitate the survival of African-American students.

Theoretically, the findings of this study suggest a number of possible routes for future research. These include the exploration of:

- o the extent to which these four advantages are available to African-American students on other campuses
- o how it is that Oberlin College and other colleges are able, through institutions, to provide these advantages; for example, what exactly do they do that provides support for African-American students

Summary

In attempting to improve the retention of African-American students in higher education, it is important that we not only look at the campus culture, but that we look also at the symbolic representations of that culture--the

cultural artifacts. Artifacts such as campus climate, sacred norms, historical image and institutions offer insight into how African-American students are treated on a given campus.

In this paper I have looked at one such artifact on the Oberlin College campus--institutions. In assessing the perceptions of members of the College community, including students, staff, faculty and administrators, I determined that three institutions--Afrikan Heritage House, The ABUSUA and The Black Studies Department--offer four key advantages to African-American students at Oberlin--support, cultural enrichment, status and political advantage. These advantages seem to be important at Oberlin and should be considered at other colleges and universities where people are concerned about the retention of African-American students.

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TABLE I
OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE

	<u>African-American</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Total</u>
Randomly Selected Faculty	1	4	5
Black Studies Faculty	5	-	5
Staff	5	1	6
African-American Students	8	-	8
Additional African-American Faculty	1	-	1
Administrators	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>6</u>
TOTAL	22	9	31

TABLE II

RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT OBERLIN'S AFRIKAN
HERITAGE HOUSE PROVIDES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

I. Support (23)

- A. offers sense of community/family (10)
- B. offers social support (4)
- C. facilitates comfort (3)
- D. offers sanctuary (2)
- E. offers support (2)
- F. offers spiritual support (1)
- G. facilitates functioning in larger community (1)

II. Cultural Enrichment (17)

- A. offers lecture series (6)
- B. offers cultural support (4)
- C. fosters pride (3)
- D. offers educational enrichment (3)
- E. offers programming (1)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents articulating this particular view.

TABLE III

RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT OBERLIN'S
ABUSUA PROVIDES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

I. Support (12)

- A. offers support (4)
- B. offers sense of community/family (4)
- C. provides moral strength (1)
- D. offers social support (1)
- E. facilitates functioning in the larger community (1)
- F. facilitates comfort (1)

II. Cultural Enrichment (15)

- A. offers cultural support (3)
- B. helps maintain identity (3)
- C. offers leadership skills development (2)
- D. offers educational enrichment (2)
- E. fosters pride (2)
- F. fosters discussion (1)
- G. fosters maturity (1)
- H. provides speakers/artists (1)

III. Political Advantages (3)

- A. provides political voice (1)
- B. offers vigilance (1)
- C. offers organizational base (1)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents articulating this particular view.

TABLE IV

RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT OBERLIN'S BLACK
STUDIES DEPARTMENT PROVIDES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

I. Status (14)

- A. has national reputation (5)
- B. has strong faculty (3)
- C. is important department (2)
- D. is strong department (2)
- E. is legitimate department (1)
- F. is successful department (1)
- G. is appreciated (1)

II. Support (5)

- A. has supportive faculty (2)
- B. is good resource (1)
- C. is good support (1)
- D. encourages African-American students enthusiasm (1)

III. Cultural Enrichment (1)

- A. focuses on African-American people (1)

IV. Political Advantage (1)

- A. provides a base (1)

Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents articulating this particular view.